

## **BILIANA VELKOVA-THE MUSICAL**

A thesis submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art and Art History, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.

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## ABSTRACT

*Biliana Velkova-The Musical* is a personal story about coming of age within two distinct ideologies, communism and capitalism and the impact of immigration and assimilation. It also gives a glimpse of my two worlds and my navigation between them. It strives to add to our collective memory of communism, no matter what the reality of it was. *Biliana Velkova-The Musical* becomes part of the dialogue that is currently surfacing around the relevance of post communist realities and discourse.

The thesis paper support an exhibition project, which consists of a stop motion animation film (*Biliana Velkova-The Musical*, 12min, 2010), installed in a gallery setting. The exhibition also includes theatre chairs, velvet curtains and the name “Biliana Velkova” as a large illuminated sign. The overall exhibition is to emulate a theatre setting.

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*"When I was little, I never left Pennsylvania, and I used to have fantasies about things that I thought were happening in the Midwest, or down South, or in Texas, that I felt I was missing out on. But you can only live life in one place at a time. And your own life while it is happening to you never has any atmosphere until it's a memory. So the fantasy corners of America seem so atmospheric because you've pieced them together from scenes in movies and music and lines from books. And you live in your dream America that you've custom-made from art and schmaltz and emotions just as much as you live in your real world."*<sup>1</sup>

Growing up in communist Bulgaria, I imagined the world west of the Berlin Wall as a magical place, full of colour, neon lights and candy. These imaginary scenes were almost always accompanied by soundtracks because I grew up watching musicals. My uncle used to work in the Middle East, and he would smuggle VHS tapes of Broadway musicals and Dolly Parton films for us to see. They were illegally dubbed at someone's homemade studio, so every character had the same monotone voice of the translator but that didn't matter. What was more important was that we got a glimpse of the West. Liza Minnelli was putting on a singing show at the Kit Kat Club in *Cabaret*, Shirley MacLaine was tap dancing in *Sweet Charity*, and sweet Dolly Parton was belting her heart out in *The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*. I thought North America was a place where bursting into a song would solve the grimmest of problems, where snapping your fingers a la Bob Fosse in *Big Spender* would make everything better, and where Burt Reynolds would always be on hand to save a damsel in distress from a sticky situation.

Everyday Bulgaria around that time was not without its own dramas, both politically and socially. The Berlin Wall was slowly crumbling, the stores were empty, and in the spring of 1990, after the Bulgarian Communist Party government collapsed, we didn't get to write our high school history exam. Apparently the history we had learned up to this point

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Warhol, *America*, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985), 8.

was considered a lie and no longer valid. We had been following and studying an ideology that no longer existed and that was quickly being replaced by western capitalism. We witnessed a physical erasure of history: not long after the Berlin Wall collapsed, a helicopter flew over Sofia and took away the red star that used to adorn the top of the Bulgarian Communist Party Headquarters. Statues of Vladimir Lenin, Karl Marx and Georgi Dimitrov (who was Bulgaria's first Communist leader) were taken from public squares and either melted or left to disintegrate. Georgi Dimitrov's Mausoleum, where his body was permanently preserved like Vladimir Lenin's in the Kremlin, was quickly demolished. Street names, which carried the names of Soviet or Bulgarian Communist Party leaders, were renamed with their original prewar names. It was both frightening and exhilarating to be embarking on a new political, social and economic path where we anticipated a radically different life. All these years later, I am still trying to navigate through two conflicting ideologies, the communist and the capitalist one, and to find a comfortable spot in between. My generation is often called the "KK" (*Bulgarian translation*) generation because we are old enough to remember communism but young enough to live in capitalism.

But for me, what mattered most was that I was embarking on a new life altogether – my family had decided to immigrate to Canada. Finally, I was going to see for myself whether my fantasies of the American life represented in the musicals I grew up watching were going to become a reality. I was free both from my past - the history that was labeled a lie - and free to create a new future, which is every immigrant's dream.

In my art practice, I tend to study and critique "the West" that I thought existed on the other side of the Berlin Wall. I am also interested in investigating the dichotomy that occurs between my two worlds. As a Bulgarian Canadian I exist in two worlds, and am never completely at home in either place. I am searching to locate my identity, or rather establish it, within my work through social interventions and performances.

An early piece called *Five Days Across America on Greyhound Bus (1998)* was the beginning of my investigation of these issues. The performative piece is a series of photographs, documenting a Greyhound bus trip from Vancouver, BC to Charleston SC, where my father was living at the time. The performance took five days, as long as the

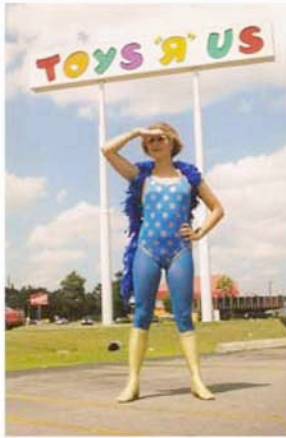


journey. At every stop, I would stage a scene similar to what I might have seen in a movie and at an earlier point of my life I would have interpreted as North American reality. Of course, it seemed like a caricature of that reality, more exaggerated than believable.



Five Days Across America on Greyhound Bus, performance, 1998

Similarly, *Super Suburbanite* (1998) was about navigating through the branded landscape of North America and situating myself within it. I did a spontaneous performance in front of large big box stores such as WalMart and Blockbuster in Charleston, SC where I dressed up as a fictional super heroine representing consumerism. In the process I was mistaken for an actual mascot of the store that I was standing in front of. The passing public thought there was a promotion or a sale being advertised. I realized that my presence not only addressed the consumerist environment but directly involved the unsuspected audience in my performance. I came close to being absorbed back onto the machinery I attempted to critique. *Super Suburbanite* (2000) became not only about navigating through the branded space but using my body as a branded symbol of marketing.



Super Suburbanite, performance, 1998

This research was made more evident in another performative piece entitled *Family Portrait* (2001). In it, I literally inserted myself in staged photo sessions for family portraits at the Sears Department Store in Vancouver. I asked families whom I did not know to pose with me as if I was part of their family. We became an idealized family for the few minutes it took to compose the photograph. The simulated look of intimacy, hand gestures and body positioning was all staged by the photographer. I found it peculiar and amazing that one can purchase a look of family happiness at Sears and make it appear real. This project furthered my research into the branding of the body and fueled my interest in the concept of *simulacrum*, which is “is a copy of a copy whose relation to the model has become so attenuated that it can no longer properly be said to be a copy.”<sup>2</sup> I also began to pay closer attention to Jean Baudrillard’s interpretation of simulation, which is that the copy becomes a *hyperreality*: “The simulacrum is never that which conceals the truth--it is the truth which conceals that there is none.”<sup>3</sup> I was beginning to build my own versions of hyperreality in my art practice.

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<sup>2</sup> Brian Massumi, “Realer than Real: The Simulacrum According to Deleuze and Guattari”, *Copyright No.1*, 1987, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 166.



Family Portrait, colour photographs, 8"x10", 2001

In the series of marching band performances, which followed, I tried to both recreate celebrations similar to the socialist marches I used to participate in as a child, and to point to the impossibilities of inhabiting the ideologies that we were supposed to follow in communist Bulgaria. We marched towards an ideology that didn't exactly unfold as promised. My idea for marching band performances was further inspired by Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot*. We all waited for a "socialist utopia" that never materialized. It is a never-ending march, and in my marching band performances such as *The Tabor Band Project (2004)* which took place in Tabor, Czech Republic, although they may look fanfaric and celebratory, I hope they provide a sense of an existential search for something that never existed in the first place. Ironically, one of the first plays that was put on after the fall of communism in Bulgaria was *Waiting for Godot*. I have seen this play a few times since, but it never resonates as true for me as when I first saw it in Sofia, all those years ago.



The Tabor Band Project, performance, 2004

In a later piece, *Homecoming* (2007), I was invited to stage a performance in Plovdiv, Bulgaria as part of an exhibition of Bulgarian artists living abroad. The curator Yana Kostova surveyed how work by Bulgarian artists was affected by immigration, new cultural environments and post communist reality. Of the artists represented in the group exhibition, I had left at the youngest age, fifteen, and in many ways was fully assimilated into North American life. For the exhibition, I invited a local Bulgarian cheerleading group to perform American style cheers on the streets of Plovdiv. Cheerleading is a strange activity, its sole purpose is to enhance the experience of the real spectacle (a football or a basketball game). It is not popular in Bulgaria as these sporting events are not widely spread. But when a NATO base moved on to the grounds where the old Soviet one used to be, in the outskirts of Plovdiv, there was a Bulgarian cheerleading group on hand to cheer at military parades, air shows and other activities that the base organized. They would sing English chants often without knowing their meaning. It seemed like a repeat of the marches we used to march in, but this time the songs were in English. The collective memory of Bulgarians had quickly erased the not-so-distant past and embraced without much criticism the new western cultural signifiers such as cheerleading, and adapted them to Bulgarian life.





Homecoming, performance, 2007

Later projects such as *Breathless (2008)* and *Live Artfully (2009)*, have dealt more directly with the impact of consumerism, addressing issues related closely with the brand, appropriation and advertising. I use brand names and logos as symbols of societal rank and prestige. These corporate signifiers critique our obsession with consumerism and question whether art has also become a commodity.

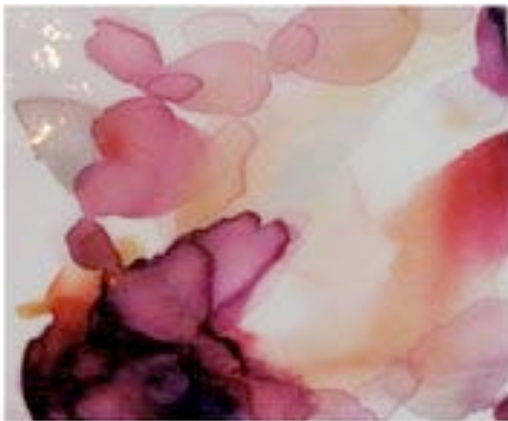
*Breathless (2008)* is a multidisciplinary project that builds *Biliana Velkova* as a brand. It intentionally merges the line between art and advertising by utilizing practices that are effectively used as marketing strategies such as poster campaigns, commercials and product launches. Reminiscent of celebrity perfume campaigns that use a popular icon to create a brand name, *Breathless (2008)* challenges this phenomenon by launching a product with an unknown persona who is devoid of a famous trademark. This work questions when an artist becomes a brand, thus blurring the lines of art, commodity, and social identity.



Breathless, advertising poster for project, 2008

In *Breathless*, I launched my own fictitious perfume using marketing tools associated with launching a line of a perfume. I created a logo, which was stamped on the artwork, the wall, shopping bags and tissue paper, all of which were on display at the gallery. In fact, the gallery was turned into a department store, with the opening being the launch of the product. The audience took their photos in front of a logo wall, reminiscent of similar red carpet photo opportunities when a product is being promoted. Even the brand of champagne served at the opening reception carried the logo *Breathless*. *Breathless (2008)* explores the notion of using an artist's name to sell a commodity, similar to a celebrity putting their name on a product for sale. The product itself was not a bottle of perfume but a piece of original art, in the shape of a box of perfume. It was loosely based on Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes (1964)*, which seem like the product but are empty inside. Even though each *Breathless* piece was an original piece of art, it was sold for the price of a 60ml.

bottle of Chanel Mademoiselle (\$79.99), which in itself was a comment on the commodification of art. The process of buying it, wrapping it in a *Breathless* tissue paper and placing it in a *Breathless* shopping bag, mirrored a department store commodity transaction taken out of context. The project spoke of the commodification of artists' names and original works of art as well as the audience's obsession with buying and collecting brand names no matter what form they are in. It again blurred the line between consumerism and fine art and created a hyperreality of a commercial environment.



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1. Biliana Velkova, *Live Artfully*, Tarttooful Art Space, 2006  
2. Hudson's Bay Company, *Live Artfully* Fall campaign, 2008

The fall 2008 campaign by the Hudson's Bay Company entitled *Live Artfully* was reminiscent of an exhibition of mine by the same name, which opened in the spring of 2006 at a small North Vancouver gallery called Tarttooful. The Bay's advertising campaign not only used similar colours, shapes, medium and artistic techniques but also appropriated the name of the show. It depicted watercolour renderings of fashion logos, which was the basis of my own concept. The Hudson's Bay Company made a corporate signifier in the style of my original art, which in itself was appropriating commodity objects. The basis of the *Live Artfully* campaign was to portray a lifestyle associated with living within art, that is, making consumer decisions based on creative choices. It proposed that anyone can be an artist if they purchased the right objects and surrounded themselves in creative expression. The campaign extended the slogan in other spheres of lifestyle such as: *Dine Artfully*, *Cook*



*Artfully and Shop Artfully.* Where is the line between advertising and art? The *Live Artfully* campaign made it difficult to distinguish the original artwork from the advertizing campaign. In this case who is borrowing from whom? I took my inspiration from consumer culture objects, but when a corporate company bases a campaign on an artist's renderings of the same objects, the line gets lost. Art works and creativity have become another commodity, readily available to help promote and sell goods. Ironically, it seems that recent artists' projects using consumer critique, have been appropriated by corporations as a strategy to continue to sell goods. The lie has been turned back on itself. The consumer wants to identify with a certain lifestyle; therefore it becomes the perfect frame for companies to sell their product.



Hudson's Bay Company, Live Artfully Fall campaign, 2008

Similar issues are the foundation of a performance I called *Makeover (2009)*. In the span of one week, I went to various beauty counters at the Bay Department store in Vancouver and asked for a makeover that copied the exact look of the model featured in a



specific ad campaign. I focused on dominant cosmetic brands such as Yves Saint Laurent, Chanel, Sheisido and Dior. Immediately following each make over session, I would go to the mall's portrait studio and get my photo taken. I attempted to copy the exact pose of the model in the ad that I was appropriating. The project investigates the subliminal messages within advertising, the representation of women in marketing campaigns, and the impossibility of achieving the idealized standards of beauty promised by the advertising media. It was another study in my research into using my body as a branded symbol and portraying a version of consumerist hyperreality.



Makeover, performance, 2009

Since advertisers are trying to sell idealized lifestyles, art and cultural references have become a readily available field of visual and symbolic signifiers. Creativity, personal fulfillment and social interactions have become markers for social prestige and are used as concepts in advertising campaigns such as the case with *Live Artfully* by the Hudson's Bay Company. Pop artists such as Andy Warhol used corporate signs such as Campbell Soup logos, which they found in advertising and the media as the basis of their work. Now advertisers are borrowing from artists for their commercial purposes. The line between the two has become blurred. Artists such as Andy Warhol, Richard Prince and Svetlana Heger, as well as advertisers such as The Hudson's Bay Company, have created their own hyperreality, therefore building their own version of a Baudrillardian simulacrum: "This is neither play nor 'realism': it is recognizing the obvious truth of the consumer society which

is that the truth of objects and products is their *brand name*.”<sup>4</sup> In late capitalism, it seems that what one owns is more valuable than personal relationships. Marx’s “commodity fetishism” seems to be very well situated within our social and economical landscape: “It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire, as values, one uniform social status, distinct from their varied forms of existence as objects of utility.”<sup>5</sup> A lifestyle, defined by brands and logos is increasingly shaping contemporary Western experience.



Cabaret, advertising poster, 1972

In my thesis exhibition I extend my interest in performance in a new direction. In this new work, spectacle, actual political events and imaginary scenes are interwoven. Searching for a way to express all of this, I decided that the most suitable genre was a musical based on my own life: *Biliana Velkova-The Musical*. I decided that as a medium, the musical would best express both the “schmaltz” as Warhol puts it, and the reality of life: it can illustrate a tragic political event and mask it with a song. Like Liza Minnelli’s performance in *Cabaret*, singing as Sally Bowles to a bubbly crowd at the Kit Kat Club as the Third Reich was to advancing power in 1930’s Berlin, it stages the spectacle of everyday life, while the political backdrop of a specific cultural geography is changing rapidly. Just as

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths & Structures* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 116.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, *Das Kapital* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1970), 54.

Iranian graphic novel writer and animator Marjane Satrapi expresses her childhood story in an animated form in the film and graphic novel *Persepolis* (2007), I wished to tell my story through a similar lens. Satrapi talks about the importance of representing her personal experiences while discussing events specific to the Iranian revolution. Often historical events are retold by people with power, the Western media or other channels of authority and seldom from the point of view of a child. In *Persepolis* (2007), we see images of a little girl growing up with the everyday woes and joys of playing on the street, going to school, arguing with her parents and eating candy, but these experiences are set against the background of the Iranian revolution, a political event of great significance. There is a certain amount of innocence that protrudes from Satrapi's story, one that truthfully exhibits what happened in both her personal life and in the political scene of Iran in 1979.

For my thesis, the musical becomes a vehicle for creating my own version of Baudrillard's hypereality and exploring the ways, as Neil Leach puts it, "Baudrillard describes our contemporary hyper real culture as a world of images that has lost touch with its referents in the 'real' world, such that the image constitutes our new 'reality'."<sup>6</sup> The sets and characters in the animated musical purposely have a "cut out" quality. They seem fake, because they are fake; one can easily see that each character and set is cut out of paper, but they readily create a new environment, which in itself becomes real. Just as Bulgaria suddenly changed political systems after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the sets of my musical quickly change from communist scenes to scenes full of corporate logos. The character Biliiana Velkova, who seemingly remains the same, navigates through these scenes as a cut-out animated figure, never quite belonging anywhere and easily situated in any environment.

In creating a musical about living between two ideologies, I also wanted to explore Frederic Jameson's notion of "crisis in historicity". The erasure of history such as the demolishing of Soviet monuments and mausoleums that occurred in Bulgaria after the fall of communism speaks directly to Jameson's theory of the disappearance of historicity. I am

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<sup>6</sup> Neil Leach, "The Aesthetic Cocoon," *OASE Magazine*, Winter 2001, 105.

interested in researching how generations are divided within this new cultural, political and social climate of Bulgaria. People born in the 1980s and later have a limited recollection of communism. It is removed from the collective memory of the younger generation of Bulgarians. As historian Maria Todorova suggests:

Besides a few publications and documentaries about the socialist epos or the socialist atrocities, there has not been a serious and responsible process of collective, public reworking of the socialist past in Bulgaria. In the aftermath of 1989, Bulgaria did not set up a museum of socialism, and until recently, the occasions, memorial days and places, events and symbols of condemnation or commemoration were scarce. Eighteen years after the transition, Sofia has neither a stylized “theme-park” memorial representing purgatory for the “sins” of socialism, nor an objective collection and recreation of socialist images, documents and paraphernalia. It is only in recent years that a series of creative projects initiated by young intellectuals in Sofia started the public process and awareness of recreating and experiencing the “smell of soc,” addressing a broader audience and dealing intensively with the socialist past. The first instance of this kind that had public repercussions was the website, [www.spomeniteni.org](http://www.spomeniteni.org), created for people to write about their memories of socialism and to upload their pictures. A book was published with a selection of these memories. In addition to its launch, a series of events took place in Sofia on the 2006 anniversary of 10th of November.<sup>7</sup>

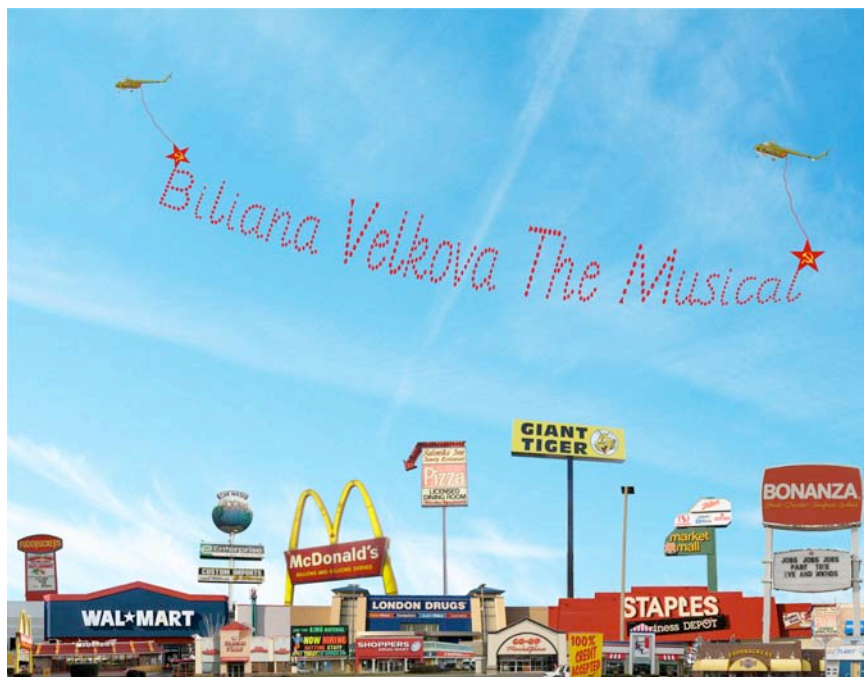
Jameson argues that with the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe, a new uncommodified territory became readily available, which advanced capitalism into a third or late stage: “The impossibility to imagine a future to which Fukuyama’s conception of the ‘end of history’ gives voice is the result of new and more fundamental spatial limits, not as a result of the end of the Cold War or the failure of socialism, as rather of the entrance of capitalism into a new third stage and its consequent penetration of as yet uncommodified

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<sup>7</sup> Maria Todorova, “The Mausoleum of Georgi Dimitrov as a lieu de memoire”, *Journal of Modern History*, (June 2006), 377

parts of the world which make it difficult to imagine any further enlargement of the system.”<sup>8</sup> In *Biliana Velkova-The Musical*, the red star that used to adorn the Bulgarian Communist Party Headquarters is replaced by corporate logos. The new capitalist ideology has penetrated the previously uncommodified territory and has slowly erased the preceding one. In the final scene of the musical, the characters are marching again, this time under the red awning of a McDonalds sign, instead of the red star.

*Biliana Velkova-The Musical* is a personal story about coming of age within two distinct ideologies, communism and capitalism and the impact of immigration and assimilation. It also gives a glimpse of my two worlds and my navigation between them. And lastly, I hope that it adds to our collective memory of communism, no matter what the reality of it was. My project becomes part of the dialogue that is currently surfacing around the relevance of post communist realities and discourse.



Biliana Velkova-The Musical, advertising poster, 2010

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<sup>8</sup> Frederic Jameson, *The Cultural Turn, Selected Writings on Postmodernism, 1983-1998*, (Verso Press, 1998), 90

Biliana Velkova – The Musical  
Scene Summary

Living under the strict rule of Communism, narrowly escaping this regime, moving to the vast Canadian landscape, and searching for my interpretation of the “American Dream”: will there be a happy ending? *Biliana Velkova-The Musical* is a true life story based on my own history.



Biliana Velkova-The Musical, still from musical, 2010

## Act 1 Scene 1

### *Cars and Candy Scene*

When I was little, I used to sit and watch the airplanes fly to the West. For us, the West represented everything on the other side of the Wall. I used to try to imagine what that world was like. In my young mind, the West was colourful, full of lollipops and chocolate and never dull like my present reality. It was an unattainable utopian land filled with promises, hope and candy. I would get lost in saccharine dreams. And as soon as the airplane had passed, I would be reminded where I was - in the land of Soviet-style concrete apartment blocks, rusty Soviet cars and surly Soviet leaders. There were no attractive stylish logos, no bright neon signs, no corner stores with candy. But most of all no colour.



Biliana Velkova-The Musical, still from musical, 2010





Biliana Velkova-The Musical, still from musical, 2010

## Act 1 Scene 2

### *Pioneers' March*

September 9, 1989. The crowd is celebrating the Bulgarian National Communist Holiday parading through the main square of Sofia. There are kids, elders and factory workers, all waving flags in front of the dignified party leaders who look down at the crowds from the balcony of the white marbled Mausoleum. This is the height of developed Socialism. School groups with local children, all dressed in the perfectly pressed uniforms of the Pioneers, a compulsory youth communist organization, carrying both the Soviet and Bulgarian flags, march below the balcony of the leaders. The watchful eye of Marx, Engels and Lenin are everywhere: on posters, flags and the buttons we are all wearing. Everyone's uniform is perfect, our red scarves neatly tied around our necks. We are Pioneers, the youngest



communists, we took an oath to protect the Party, and to love her as our own mother. The Communist ideology is our world, never to be questioned and always to be saluted. One, two, three, four, we keep marching on. The sounds of Soviet songs echo in the background. Little do we know these are the Party's last moments. Merely two months after this last march, it will all be over.

Something isn't right. A helicopter flies over Sofia and carries away the red star adorning the top of the Communist Party Headquarters. I watch in dismay, is it real, a dream, or a nightmare? Should I be celebrating? The helicopter takes the star away and with that a new chapter in my life and my little country begins.



Biliana Velkova-The Musical, still from musical, 2010



Biliana Velkova-The Musical, still from musical, 2010

## Act 2 Scene 1

### *Canadiana*

Not long after the star atop the Party Headquarters was gone and replaced with the new Bulgarian Republic's flag, I got on a plane heading west. I was finally to see what is on the other side of the wall. I landed in a place I didn't know anything about- Canada. There seemed to be no noise, no crowds, the scene was serene. When I looked at the sky, I saw birds, not helicopters taking away red metal stars. I saw animals I have never seen before like beavers and elk. This new land was quickly overwhelming me with colours and light.



Biliana Velkova-The Musical, still from musical, 2010

## Act 2 Scene 2

### *Marching at the Mall*

Fast forward a few years. I am grown now, I am used to the colours, brands and neon signs. But I find them jarring sometimes. Some days I wish for the quietness of the Communist gray concrete blocks. In this land of big box stores, there is a new ideology, the one of commercialism. Its symbols like the golden arches and rotating red striped chicken bucket are just as powerful as the communist red stars and concrete statues.

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